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The Expression of Intensity

Introduction

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Introduction

Lucile Bordet, Maria Napoli and Miriam Ravetto

- 1 The notion of “intensity” is closely linked to the expression of degree. Building on Bordet [2014], among others, the expression of intensity may even be regarded as a subtype of the expression of degree, in that it enhances, strengthens or scales upward a quality of the element that is intensified. However, there is one main differentiating feature that needs to be taken into account when dealing with the notions of “intensity” and “degree”. Contrary to the expression of “degree”, which seems to rely on objective criteria, the expression of “intensity” is of a more subjective nature, according to Xiao & Tao [2007], Athanasiadou [2007] and Bordet & Jamet [2015], Napoli & Ravetto [2017 forthcoming] to name but a few.
- 2 Given the multiple devices available to express “intensity”, as well as the various functions endorsed by the expression of “intensity” – be they an emotive function, a cathartic function, a euphemistic function, a humorous function, a persuasive function or a metalinguistic function, intensification seems to pervade everyday language and can be considered as a multi-faceted linguistic phenomenon.
- 3 And yet, historically, the notion of “intensity” has received very little attention from scholars besides the works of Stoffel [1901], Benzinger [1971], and Bolinger [1972]. It is only recently that renewed interest in the study of intensity has been observed. However, the few studies that have been conducted so far seem to be mainly centered on the morphosyntactic devices used to express intensity, whereas in fact this notion may be expressed through a variety of devices. Very often those devices are cumulative.
- 4 Intensity may be expressed via no fewer than 14 different processes according to Bordet [2014] and Bordet & Jamet [2015], building on Benzinger [1971]. These processes are as diverse as the use of intensifying adverbs, the emphatic DO, exaggeration, exclamations, repetitions, intonation and stress, etc. As such, they resort to morphosyntactic, phonological, stylistic, semantic and also lexical devices (see also the recent contributions in Napoli & Ravetto (eds.) [2017, forthcoming]). Given that these processes generally belong to at least two branches of linguistic study, they tend to be all the more difficult for scholars to identify and classify accurately.

- 5 It is a commonplace idea that the expression of intensity seems to rely mostly on morphosyntactic devices. Unsurprisingly, morphosyntax is the one area that has been most researched into. The purpose of this 10th issue of *Lexis* is to investigate those areas of the expression of “intensity” that have been long ignored by scholars, mostly the word-formation processes that can be resorted to in order to express this notion, e.g. prefixation, suffixation, metaphor, and so on.
- 6 The papers included in this issue are based on English, French, Modern and Ancient Greek.
- 7 In his paper, **Vincent Hugou** investigates the link between the WHX construction (*what the hell...?*) and intensity through a corpus-based study of American English. He chooses to anchor his study in the theoretical framework of construction grammar. His aim is to show that such constructions are not intrinsically “intense”, but rather, that intensity derives from an emotion. He also argues that both syntactic (*what in the hell, what in hell...*) and lexical variations (*what the freak, what the pus-rotted hell...*) may be observed in the pattern of the WHX construction. He rejects “strict constructional synonymy” and explains that such variations are in fact linked to varying degrees of intensity.
- 8 The second paper of the volume investigates the renewal of intensifiers in English. **Lucile Bordet** aims to show that even if intensifiers are popularized because of their intensifying force, their increasing frequency of use results in the weakening of their intensifying potential. She argues that intensifiers whose expressivity is weakened tend to be “recycled” and are assigned new roles. She focuses on the renewal process involving linguistic elements that were once vogue words and that became lexicalized intensifying adverbs. She also argues that there seems to be a correlation between the intensifying force of an adverb and language register and aims to establish that recently created intensifiers tend to bear on parts of speech belonging to colloquial language, while “older” intensifiers modify parts of speech belonging mostly to the standard or formal registers.
- 9 In the third paper of the volume, **Silvia Cacchiani** studies the motivation in English complex intensifying adjectives following the theoretical framework of cognitive linguistics. She examines the concepts of “degree”, “scale” and “boundedness”. The author observes that the development of intensifiers involves a shift from objectivity to subjectivity. She postulates the existence of three subtypes of phrasal constructs: “a degree type (*all-new*), a semantic-feature-copying type (*snow-white, cold*), and a type where intensification relies on the integration of scales which are associated with lexical meanings typically located in different knowledge domains (red hot and roaring drunk)”.
- 10 **Aurélie Barnabé** investigates the linguistic markers at work in the expression of movement in a comparative study of French and English. She investigates the notion of intensity through an experiment that was conducted on adults. The targeted groups were composed of French native speakers and English native speakers. They were asked to use lexical patterns felt to be intense. The result of her study allows her to formulate a definition of the notion of “intensity”. The purpose of her paper is to establish a cross-linguistic comparison of the linguistic devices used to express movement and intensity.

- 11 In her paper, **Angeliki Efthymiou** concentrates on intensification and deintensification in Modern Greek verbs. She examines the morphological means of expressing “intensification” and “deintensification”, and more specifically the prefixes or pseudo-prefixes used in the formation of verbs. She further demonstrates the difference between prefixes and pseudo-prefixes: the results of her research lead her to conclude that prefixed verbs are mostly used to express intensity, while the notion of “deintensification” is mainly conveyed through the use of pseudo-prefixes. The last point that she develops is that the morphemes used to express intensification and deintensification in Modern Greek stem from a process of grammaticalization and refunctionalization.
- 12 The last paper of this issue deals with the expression of intensity in Ancient Greek. **Elisabetta Magni** argues that the present and the perfect include atypical and recessive groups of verbs expressing intensity which exhibit reduplication. She questions their origin and their semantics as well as the label “intensive perfect”, which she deems inadequate. The author focuses on the correlation between intensification, reduplication and pluractionality and attempts to clarify the roles and the evolution of Homeric verbs inflected as perfects .
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